



DARE TO BE GRAPE

THESE SIX SPLENDID WINERIES ARE SETTING THE STANDARD FOR TEXAS VITICULTURE.

BY JESSICA DUPUY

In the late sixties, Texas Tech chemistry professor Clinton “Doc” McPherson and horticulture professor Bob Reed planted a few wine grapes outside Lubbock. The deep sandy loam had long been home to cotton, peanuts, and soybeans, but never to grapes. To their surprise, the vines flourished, producing fruit as ripe and balanced as what you might find in Southern France. The two went on to establish Llano Estacado Winery, the second bonded Texas winemaking operation since Prohibition. Today it is one of the largest wineries in the state, producing several premier, restaurant-only wines in addition to its commercial line.

Others soon followed suit. In 1975 Fall Creek Vineyards, in Tow, planted its first vines; Messina Hof Winery and Resort, in Bryan, did the same two years later. Now each produces nearly 50,000 cases annually. Through trial and error in testing soils, climate, and various grape varieties, these pioneers laid the foundation for Texas viticulture. Now a new generation of vintners is taking these lessons and advancing the industry beyond anything that could have been imagined half a century ago. The following six wineries are creating wines that aren’t just excellent, they’re authentic. They taste like Texas.

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While I’d been critical of the thinness and sour flavors that marked many Texas wines, I’d also highlighted various other winemakers who were experimenting with grapes, harvesting times, and vineyard sites, setting up the state’s wine for a better future.

Well, here we are in the future. So this summer, I came back to spend some time looking into how Texas’s wines and wine culture have evolved.

Wine is the ultimate slow food. To produce something palatable, grape vines must be meticulously tended—pruned, precisely irrigated, and guarded against an onslaught of pests, molds, diseases, and unpredictable, ever-changing weather conditions.

After the fruit is ready, a million more decisions must be made in order to guide the juice into becoming wine; one must choose the optimal harvesting moment, whether or not to use ambient or commercial yeasts, and so on. Mistakes at any point could seriously compromise the development of acidity, flavor, and tannins. Since this process happens only once a year, most vintners will never have more than thirty or forty shots in their lives to get it right. Compare that with the world’s greatest wines, whether from France, Spain, or Italy, which have benefited from thousands of years of uninterrupted practice. Texas’s modern industry is only in its forties, a blip in wine time. And thanks to the extreme climate, it’s exceptionally hard to grow supple wine grapes here. In California, where it’s easy, wines were already garnering international attention a century before the shocking Judgment of Paris, when a Golden State wine ranked best in each category at the Paris Wine Tasting of 1976. Today California boasts over 600,000 acres of vineyards, offering its winemakers boundless sources of grapes for experimentation. Texas’s acreage, on the other hand, is a drop in the bucket, roughly 4,000 acres.

Somewhereness cannot be manufactured, only discovered, and discovery in those mere 4,000 acres depends on asking the right questions. The main character in “Sour Grapes,” Jim Johnson, who with his wife, Karen, created Alamosa Wine Cellars in 1996, was asking the right ones from the beginning. What grapes should be grown? And what location had the best combination | CONTINUED ON PAGE 196



MCPHERSON CELLARS

LUBBOCK, HIGH PLAINS

After Kim McPherson learned to press with some of the best in Napa Valley and at Llano Estacado Winery, founded by his father, he launched McPherson Cellars in 1998. Since then, he’s produced a consistent (and approachably priced) lineup made with warm-climate grapes. The light and fruity 2013 Les Copains Red (\$14) is a blend of the “red friends” that originated in France’s rugged Southern Rhône region: Mourvèdre, Cinsault, Carignan, Grenache, and Syrah. Brimming with ripe strawberries and tart cherries, it holds an earthy undertone. The 2014 Albariño (\$16), with a tropical fruit and lemon zest nose framed by minerality, suits grilled seafood. **1615 Texas Ave, 806-687-9463**



DUCHMAN FAMILY WINERY

DRIFTWOOD, SOUTH HILL COUNTRY

One of the state’s most consistent producers, Duchman Family Winery built its reputation on Italian grape varieties, believing that what is good for the Italian soils of Tuscany, Abruzzo, and Sardinia is also good for Texas. Today it vinifies a few other, non-Italian grapes, like Tempranillo, but its soul is still poured into wines like its rich and earthy Montepulciano (\$19), with hints of black cherry, sautéed mushroom, and cocoa, and its sturdy Sangiovese (\$15), accented by bright Bing cherry, cola, and hints of hot red earth. The lemony Vermentino (\$15) has a touch of orange blossom and tropical pineapple on the nose. **13308 FM 150, 512-858-1470**



LEWIS WINES

JOHNSON CITY, HILL COUNTRY

Longtime soccer buddies Doug Lewis and Duncan McNabb sidestepped corporate life after earning business and chemistry degrees, respectively, and bought one hundred acres between Johnson City and Hye, where they built a winery from the ground up. There they produce bold reds and crisp whites with grapes sourced from six acres of their estate, as well as from the High Plains and elsewhere in the Hill Country. Their quaffable 2014 Swim Spot (\$14) is a Vinho Verde style of wine known for its freshness and light body, while their 2011 Round Mountain Vineyard Reserve (\$50), crafted from Tempranillo, Tinta Cão, and Touriga Nacional, is robust and deeply structured. **3209 U.S. 290 West, 512-987-0660**



WILLIAM CHRIS VINEYARDS

HYE, HILL COUNTRY

Opened in 2008, this partnering of wine veteran William Blackmon and recently graduated A&M entomology and horticulture major Chris Brundrett made Hye, a tiny town near Fredericksburg, a must-stop for wine lovers. Driven by a “wine is grown in the vineyard, not made” philosophy, William Chris tries not to change the expression of the fruit once it has been picked. The blending and barrel aging complement the wine rather than dominate it. The Enchanté red blend (\$42) is very popular, but single varietals like the new Texas Mourvèdre (\$36) and the 2011 Estate Block 500 Merlot (\$45) allow the grapes that are best suited for Texas soils to speak for themselves. **10352 U.S. 290, 830-998-7654**



SPICEWOOD VINEYARDS

SPICEWOOD, HILL COUNTRY

Just northwest of Austin along Texas Highway 71, Spicewood Vineyards has cornered the market for Sauvignon Blanc in Texas by successfully growing an unlikely candidate for Texas’s climate with a little luck from its well-drained sandy loam soils. The 2014 (\$17) is a beautiful example, with aromas of white daisy and lemongrass and hints of grapefruit, papaya, and guava on the palate. Its 2012 Hill Country Estate Tempranillo (\$46) is arguably the state’s best expression of the Spanish grape, and its newly released 2013 Syrah (\$30), with its dark fruit beneath light notes of smoked meat, is reminiscent of Rhône Valley greats. **1419 County Road 409, 830-693-5328**



PEDERNALES CELLARS

STONEWALL, HILL COUNTRY

Although the Kuhlken family has grown red Bordeaux and Spanish varietals for more than 25 years, they didn’t establish their own winery until 2006, when two siblings and their spouses partnered to open a production facility and tasting room. Their champion Spanish red variety Tempranillo Reserve (\$50) and Southern French white variety Viognier (\$17) have regularly won gold medals from the San Francisco International Wine Competition, the TexSom International Wine Awards, and the Lyon International Wine Competition. Also of note is a French Rhône “GSM” (Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre, \$26), with leather, cocoa, and pepper notes. **2916 Upper Albert Rd, 830-644-2037**

UNEXPECTED WINE FINDS

COMFORT: Bending Branch Winery’s Tannat grapes, a dark, inky variety from Southwest France and Uruguay, make for innovative wines with rich fruit concentration and grippy tannin. **2012 Estate Tannat, CM, \$60. DEL RIO:** Val Verde Winery, founded in the sleepy border city in 1883, is the state’s oldest continuously running winery and has been operated by four generations of Qualias. **Don Luis Tawny Port, \$40. SANTA FE:** Haak Vineyards & Winery, which has been flourishing in Galveston County for more than thirty years, consistently makes a Madeira on par with some of the best from its titular source in Portugal. **2013 Madeira Blanc du Bois, \$39.95. FORT STOCKTON:** Mesa Vineyards spans more than five hundred acres (making it the state’s largest vineyard) and produces 600,000 cases of wine under labels ranging from Ste. Genevieve to Peregrine Hill to its very own Mesa Vineyards, which you can taste at the historic Grey Mule Saloon. **2013 Mesa Vineyards Chenin Blanc, \$12. TYLER:** Kiepersol Estates Winery is known for the linear character of its “stainless” Cabernet Sauvignons, Merlots, and Syrahs, which are aged in stainless-steel tanks rather than in oak barrels, a practice virtually unheard of for such aggressive grapes. **2012 Stainless Cabernet Sauvignon, \$23.**